

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 789

CS 209 754

AUTHOR Clines, Raymond H.
TITLE Collaboration and the Inadequacy of Current Models of Composition.
PUB DATE 1 Mar 86
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (37th, New Orleans, LA, March 13-15, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperation; Higher Education; Secondary Education; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Writing; Rhetorical Theories

ABSTRACT

While models of expressive writing are supposed to encourage individuals to look within and release what is good and true, growing up with such a model may be counterproductive in that writers may never learn to take advantage of social interaction that might be of help in the invention and prewriting stage, and thus fail to realize the benefits of collaboration. Another failing of the current models for composition is that those who learn that writing is a solitary act will feel that if they do not write, they have only themselves to blame. It does not occur to them to consider that the ways they interact with others and with social collectives could have something to do with writing failures as well as successes. Almost nowhere in current composition theory or pedagogy does one find out about writing jointly with others, or about writing negotiatively in constrained settings, or about the important role that resonating relationships play in writing. Thus, it is not surprising that when teachers do try to incorporate collaborative teaching techniques in the classroom, they fail. Organizing collaborative learning effectively may require new and more thorough analyses of the elements of the composition field than have been attempted. A number of contemporary critical perspectives may help point the direction that such analyses could take, especially if teachers are to develop the kind of theoretical framework that would make collaboration truly workable. For example, Marxist, deconstructionist, reader-response, and certain scientific theories all counter the notion of the isolated writer. Viewing writing in a collaborative context means that writing teachers must acknowledge that they cannot always solve writing problems by working with individuals alone. (HTH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED269789

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

COLLABORATION AND THE INADEQUACY
OF CURRENT MODELS OF COMPOSITION

BY

RAYMOND H. CLINES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
EASTERN OREGON STATE COLLEGE
LA GRANDE, OREGON 97850

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Raymond H. Clines

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

2

CS 209 754

If we look at a hypothetical student writer at her desk, alone, on a Sunday night, with not even the radio for company, at work on a draft, we might conclude on the basis of this single observation that writing is a private, asocial act. And, indeed, a number of current theories of writing proceed from the prospective that writing is a private activity carried out through introspection and directed by an innate, internal mechanism. To write, D'Angelo says, you "reach into the recesses of your mind, to spin out of yourself a thread of thought that will develop into an orderly web" (34). According to him we are born with certain cognitive categories that are analagous to the topoi, and we project these upon the world. For D'Angelo, Kirby and Liner, Moffet, Macrorie, and many other writers of composition articles and textbooks--especially those concerned with writing as self-expression--writing moves from the inside out, from writer to world. Using such techniques as freewriting, cubing, looping, analogy--even meditation--the writer's aim is to uncover his inner potential.

The social and material world, especially as manifested in the educational system, is thought to prevent us from developing those private internal capacities we naturally possess as children. "When we were little we had no difficulty sounding the way we felt," Peter Elbow says; "thus most children speak and write with real voice" (306). For Elbow, what we try to regain is "real voice"; for Ken Macrorie, it is "truth"; for Gabriele Rico, it is "expressive power" and "authenticity" (16). Our work as writers must be to release what lies within. Writing as "truthtelling" is, for Macrorie, "the great releaser" (ii); to write the "natural way" according to the subtitle of Rico's book, you must learn to "rekindle your creative expressive powers that began when you first learned to speak--in the uninhibited delight you had in using words long before formal rules and painful criticism blocked your natural drive for self-expression" (16).

To write naturally, Rico says, you should look within to untap the resources latent in the right brain. Peter Stillman in his composition text Writing Your Way states, "This book. . . urges you to fill blank paper with the stuff of your world and not someone else's" (2). From such models we see writing as the unfolding of the individual's ideas, feelings, personality, patterns, and voice, all of which exist independent of anyone else's.

Such models for writing are not wrong; they are useful for understanding one way that discourse may be created. Such models may give rise to inventional methods that help writers to break through convention and stereotype, and they may reassure them that they do have many possibilities and resources within. Such models, however, are incomplete. Do I know "my" world apart from someone else's? Is my world necessarily different from someone else's?

While models of expressive writing are supposed to encourage individuals to look within and release what is good and true, growing up with such a model may be counter-productive in that it may thwart creativity. If we teach people to stay apart always when they write--coming together, perhaps, only in the editing or revising stages--they never learn to take advantage of social interaction when it might be a help in the generation of ideas--the prewriting and initial drafting stages. Or they know so little about how to act collaboratively--how to invent together--that they can never stop competing long enough to realize the benefits of collaboration.

It is hardly surprising to find that such extremes of individualism flourish in capitalistic societies, where the individual is not only allowed but also encouraged to compete to maximize profit for the benefit of himself and his enterprise. In the context of discussing theories of

pedagogy in contemporary composition, James Berlin has noted that teachers of writing teach more than writing per se: "In teaching writing we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student's place and mode of operation in it" (766). In advocating a focus on the individual as writer, we make inquiry a private matter. We give assignments to individuals. We grade individuals. We encourage individuals to work on their own and do independent, original work. All of this we do automatically, in hopes of attaining laudable goals: increasing a student's self-reliance, encouraging self-expression, rewarding individual effort. There are, of course, good things to be said about education aimed toward these purposes.

At the same time there is a tacit political agenda behind this emphasis on the solitary individual as writer. An instructional system that urges students to look into their minds for ideas and then claim individual ownership for what they discover is certainly in line with the aims of capitalistic societies, in which ideas and discoveries, like everything else, become the property owned by individuals, able to be bought and sold. As Richard Ohmann points out in English in America, not only is such a view incorrect—"The greatest innovator adds only an iota to the structure of ideas he inherits" (317)—but it is dangerous: allowing individuals to use ideas as they see fit will undoubtedly have unfortunate consequences in a world where technology expands constantly and affects everyone's life. Nonetheless, the prevailing model for composition instruction, as put into practice in our schools, is truly preparing individuals for life in a society where capitalism and individualism are stressed and where the all-important goal is being able to "think for yourself."

Another failing of the current models for composition is that people who grow up learning that writing is a solitary act will feel that if they don't write, they have only themselves to blame. Something must be wrong inside of them. It often does not occur to them to consider that the

ways they interact with others and with social collectives could have something to do with writing failures as well as with success.

Almost nowhere in current composition theory or pedagogy does one find out about writing jointly with others, or writing negotiatively in constrained settings, or about the important role that resonating relationships play in writing. Such omissions are striking even in contemporary approaches to teaching that explicitly address the writing process as well as the written product. And even in courses where students are encouraged to participate as peer evaluators of each writer's work, helping the writer to revise and sometimes to invent additional or different ideas, we still, in the end, grade the essay or theme or story not as a social invention of a group of collaborators, but as the individual product of the writer whose name appears at the top of the page. The structure of our course^s and our assignments, and especially our methods of evaluation, reflect our unspoken assumption that writing is a private, asocial act.

It is not surprising that when we do get around to attempting to incorporate collaborative teaching techniques in our classes that we seem to flounder. As Kenneth Bruffee points out:

Many teachers are unsure about how to use collaborative learning and about when and where, appropriately, it should be used. Many are concerned also that when they try to use collaborative learning in what seem to be effective and appropriate ways, it sometimes quite simply fails" (636).

Bruffee goes on to suggest that organizing collaborative learning effectively may require "quite new and perhaps more thorough analyses of the elements of our field than we have yet attempted" (652). A number of contemporary critical perspectives may help point the direction that such analyses could take, especially if we are to develop the kind of theoretical framework which would make collaboration truly workable.

Marxist, deconstructionist, reader-response, and certain scientific theories all counter the notion of the isolated writer. For example, the Marxist literary perspective contests the view that ideas are the private property of individuals or that literature and the other arts can remain asocial and apolitical. Richard Ohmann has observed that in bourgeois society the invention of ideas is, like everything else, treated as a commodity; it is regulated by patent law, which "makes legal the private ownership of ideas and emphasizes their cash value, but ignores the social origin of all inventions--the shared knowledge that underlies them--and also the sometimes devastating social consequences of their use" (Politics 151).

Certain views of contemporary French writers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are also at odds with a view of literature and composition as focused on an individual, isolated writer producing a discrete text. Derrida would claim that we do not write about objects or essences in themselves, but about words; thus, we draw upon things that are already written. A text comes from and depends upon previous texts. Words bring other words into being, and have their own roots in previous words. Drafts evolve from previous drafts, which evolve from others preceding them. There is no absolute, fixed starting point, only "differences within differences." According to Derrida, as critic Frank Lentriccia explains, a given literary text or discourse such as a poem or novel cannot be considered in total isolation from other texts as New Criticism would have us do. Nor, for that matter, can one discipline's discourse be artificially separated from discourses in other fields. Discourse does not refer outside itself to objects, but rather to other discourses. Instead of isolated text, we have "textuality," which Lentriccia describes as "a potentially infinite and indefinite, all-inclusive series of networks of interrelation whose connections and boundaries are not securable" (189).

Taken at its extreme, a deconstructionist view comes under criticism for suggesting that there is no text, only an endless sort of textuality, or series of indeterminate texts. Taken less extremely, however, this direction of current criticism does help to provide us with a useful perspective on writing that ^{may} help us to broaden the base of current composition models to include collaboration. Michel Foucault also advocates a view that may provide a basis for a composition model more compatible with collaboration. Foucault prefers to think of a beginning in discourse as a re-emergence into an ongoing, never-ending process. He wants not ^{to} enter "this risky world of discourse," but instead "to feel it all around me, calm and transparent, profound, infinitely open, with others responding to my expectations, and truth emerging" (216). For Foucault, truth is not something that is released from with ⁱⁿ as D'Angelo, Macrorie, and other current composition theorists would have us believe, but something that surrounds us, socially, and becomes apparent through the interaction of others. For Foucault, discourse is not an isolated event produced at a particular point in time by an individual author, but a constant potentiality, the beginnings and ends of which are not clearly obvious or absolute.

Another potentially fertile area for composition theorists may be in the ^o ~~w~~orks of reader-response critics such as Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, and others who give to readers a participatory ⁱ role in creating the meaning of a text, and claim that readers function as members of "interpretive communities." Writer and reader exist as part of a larger social context according to this view, and that notion is discomfiting to critics who have long preferred to regard the author as an isolated, unique figure to be studied apart from social concerns, apart from collective forces such as language and conventions of form. Given this traditional literary or-

ientation of the New Critics that consider an individual author and text apart from social or cultural forces, it is not surprising that those of us with literary backgrounds have been inclined to favor the same sort of view when we think of rhetorical invention and the teaching of composition. Literary criticism since the fifties has begun to attack this traditional view of literary study; Barthes, for instance, prefers "to amputate literature from the individual" by regarding authors as "participants in an institutional activity that transcends their individuality" (162). But many of us inherit from our literary backgrounds an inclination to concern ourselves with reading rather than with actual readers, and with interpretation rather than with actual writers.

Finally, another area that may hold promise for evolving collaborative models of composing comes from the scientific community. Bruffee has already documented the potential impact of the theories of Thomas Kuhn, the position that even in hard sciences knowledge is a social artifact and, hence, is maintained by communities of knowledgeable peers (646). Another concept of a collective body of knowledge and practice in science, one which predates and is in some ways similar to Kuhn's, is Ludwig Fleck's view of a "thought collective." Fleck develops this concept in the context of his study of the way the medical community evolved its diagnosis and treatment of syphilis. For Fleck, cognition involves not only the relationship between subject and object but also the relationship of a third, collective entity: the existing fund of knowledge contained in the thought collective. The individual is largely unaware of the prevailing thought style of a collective, but it "almost always exerts an absolutely compulsive force upon his thinking" (41). While individuals do play an important

role in discovery, in the case of the identification and treatment of syphilis, and in much of science and medicine, Fleck maintains, the individual who is identified as discoverer is usually part of a team, building on a fund of collectively held knowledge, and is "rather a standard-bearer in discovery than its sole agent" (42). According to this view of scientific discovery, it is essential to investigate the social collective as well as the individual to understand the development and acceptance of scientific knowledge. Collectives are enormously influential in discovery, at times aiding innovation by providing information and structures for thinking and evaluating, and at times inhibiting it by biasing perception and cognition and by causing resistance to styles of thought or types of evidence contrary to those espoused by a collective. In science and in other fields as well, the collective can be a positive as well as a restrictive force in relation to the creation of ideas.

I hope that these examples from various fields have suggested that social collectives play a crucial role in the process of thinking and, ultimately, in writing. If we once question the radical individualism that pervades our culture as well as our composition theories, then we will be forced to view writing in a way that differs from the majority of the composing models currently available. As teachers wishing to incorporate methods of collaboration successfully in the composition classroom, we need to re-evaluate educational assumptions and rewrite textbooks to dispel the simplistic notions of "authenticity" and self-discovered "truths" being penned (in whatever form) by an inspired individual who then makes her ideas available for consumption to the waiting audience/reader. We will

need to begin seeing ourselves, as Wayne Booth suggests, as "a field of selves":

What happens, then if we choose to begin with our knowledge that we are essentially creatures made in symbolic interchange, created in the process of sharing intentions, values, meanings; in fact more like each other than different, more valuable in our commonality than in our indiosyncracies: not, in fact, anything at all when considered separately from our relations? What happens if we think of our selves as essentially participants in a field or process or mode of being persons together? (134)

Applying such a collaborative context to writing asks us to look at the writer as part of a community, a socio culture, a sphere of overlapping and sometimes conflicting collectives. It requires us to pay attention to social contexts, discourse communities, political aims. It reminds us that writers write not only in the study but also in the smoke-filled tavern; not only alone but in the company of others with whom they must work, or with whom they choose to talk and think; and not in utter isolation even when they are alone, but by means of infinite conversations going on with others whom they have constructed or brought into their minds.

Viewing writing in a such a collaborative context means that we think of writing as influenced by biases that are socially born and carried and perhaps built into a socially shared language with which we communicate both orally and in writing. It means that we regard writing as an act of individuals and of groups, and as an act that is incomplete until it is received (even though it may be ignored or discredited) by an audience or community. It means that we as writing teachers must acknowledge that we cannot always solve writing problems by working with individuals alone. We may have to venture into interpersonal and collective realms, taking into account the

social and political dimensions of writing. It means that we need to view what our students write as something that develops through a series of drafts and conversations, something that may have social consequences, and something that is evaluated according to socially evolved values and means, placed in a context that includes the writings of others who have gone before. To consider writing in this way requires us to think not only of one person writing alone; nor only of one writing followed by another and then another; but as one writing in part because of others, and thinking fruitfully in the company of a great many others, some living, some dead, some actual, some imaginary.

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. On Racine. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.
- Berlin, James A. "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." College English 44, no. 8 (December 1982), 760-772.
- Booth, Wayne C. Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Bruffee, Kenneth. "Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind." College English, Vol. 46, no. 7 (November 1981), 635-652.
- D'Angelo, Frank J. Process and Thought in Composition, 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1980.
- Elbow, Peter. Writing with Power. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981.
- Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980.
- Fleck, Ludwik. Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact. eds., Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Discourse on Language." The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language. Trans. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon, 1982, pp. 215-238.
- Lentriccian, Frank. After the New Criticism. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Macrorie, Ken. Telling Writing. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1978.
- Onmann, Richard. "Teaching and Studying Literature at the End of Ideology." In The Politics of Literature. eds. Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter. New York: Random House, 1972, pp. 130-159.
- _____. English in America. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976.
- Rico, Gabriele Lusser. Writing the Natural Way. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1983.
- Stillman, Peter. Writing Your Way. New York: Hayden Co., 1984.